

In the Hands of War : Book I

by Illyandria V

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Summary: Xena and Gabrielle take on a warlord, but Gabrielle gets captured and Xena is hurt severely. She has no choice but to ask the God of War for help...

In the Hands of War : Book I

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Title: In the Hands of War: Book One

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Disclaimer: All characters in this story, with the exception of Emerald, are property of MCA, Universal, and Renaissance Pictures. No copyright infringement was intended in the making of this story.

However, the priestess Emerald belongs to ME!

>Profanity: No

>Love Disclaimer: This story is about Xena and Ares in love! If you have something against that, or you can't stomach it, then I suggest you move on to another story.

>Violence: Not a whole lot of it, at least not in Book One. There are a couple of sword fights, but that's basically a studentmentor thing with Ares and Xena.

>
Sex: Well, er...um...there's a hint of it. I mean, it's important to the plot. Really important. But...then again, it is ancient Greece. I suppose it could have been done differently. Only that would have been a little too peculiar. Okay, enough said.

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Rating: PG

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Author's Notes: I'd like to point out a couple of things. In this story, it's like "The Reckoning" never happened. Even though I absolutely loved that episode, it doesn't really work with this story. So, just act like "Ties That Bind" was the first encounter with Ares after Xena's rebirth. I'd also like to say that this story in no way connects to my others. At least not yet. Send all feedback to AresAdorer@aol.com

>
Special thanks to:

>Larissa, for inspiring me to write fan fiction in the first place.
Emily, for helping me out and listening to me rant when I

had writer's block.

>Jo and Xandra, for absolutely loving my stories.
Dedication:
This story is dedicated to all of the above people, to Melanie, and
the guys at the Ares and Xena club.

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>Oh, great. Just great. I'll be seeing Hades soon, I'm sure, Xena
thought. It had started to rain.

>As if her situation wasn't bad enough. She was riding on Argo, only
half conscious, after trying to defeat some warlord who felt the need
to send what seemed to be a whole army after herself and Gabrielle.
And the warlord had captured Gabrielle. She had to go back and find
her, but first she had to heal her wounds.

>Now, here she was, riding with a gash in her side, one on her head
that was bleeding too much, a foot-long cut that ran down her left
arm, and bruises everywhere imaginable. She tried to keep pressure on
her head wound. How she had managed to mount Argo was beyond her.
Everything was a blur; the memories, and her surroundings. It was
almost dark and she'd been riding for hours looking for a place to
stop. She hadn't passed anything yet. She had no idea where she was
headed.

>Just when she thought she was going to pass out, she saw something
up ahead. Finally, a spark of hope! A quarter-mile up the road a
shape that looked like a building loomed off to the side.

>Oh, thank the gods!

>She pushed Argo on faster. In a matter of minutes that seemed to
last an eternity, she got to her destination and let out a weak cry
of frustration.

>Of all the places!

>She considered her options. Deciding she'd probably be dead by the
time she reached the next house or town, she practically fell off of
Argo and walked toward the door of the building. She grasped the
handle, pulled, and stepped inside.

>"Ares," she whispered.

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>"But, Lord Ares, with all do respect, that strategy seems suicidal,"
Veronos argued.

>"Veron-" Ares said, but stopped short. Someone was calling to him.
No...not just someone...it was Xena! She was at one of his temples!
"Veronos, do what you like," Ares said. "I'll be back later." And
without a word of explanation, he disappeared.

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>"Ares," she whispered again.

>He appeared in front of her, a look of surprise crossing his face as
he looked her over.

>Standing there, sopping wet, her strength drained, and she felt
herself collapse. She was surprised when she saw Ares run over and
catch her before she hit the floor. She mustered up enough strength
to look up at him shakily.

>"You look like you've been to Tartarus and back," he whispered.

"What happened?"

>"I...I..." she stammered, but shivered as the cold overwhelmed her.
She forced herself to stay conscious for a few more seconds. "Let's
just get one thing straight: If you do help me, I'm still not coming
back to you." Her body convulsed, and her eyes closed.

>Ares cursed softly, and they appeared at his bedchamber in his
palace on Olympus. He laid her down gently, and a fire started in the
hearth. He frowned, and quickly tended to the wound on her head,

washing it, and bandaging it.

>"Gods, what did you get yourself into, my sweet?" he whispered to her unconscious form.

>He carefully removed her breastplate, sword, and breast dagger. His brow furrowed when he couldn't find the gift he had bestowed upon her years ago.

>Then he remembered. It had split in half right before Caesar had her crucified.

>He removed her leathers, shin guards, boots, and gauntlets, leaving her clothed only in her soaking shift. He carefully peeled the wet clothing from her body, and frowned again as he saw the large gash in her side. He hurriedly washed and bandaged it, too, wrapping the bandage around her middle. Then, he quickly dried her off, and then covered her up with a thick blanket.

>"Emerald!" Ares shouted.

>One of his priestesses appeared in the doorway.

>"Yes, Lord Ares?" Emerald asked. A look of shock crossed her face as she saw Xena on the bed. "Xena!"

>Ares nodded his head grimly.

>"How bad is it?" Emerald asked, concerned.

>"She's lost a lot of blood, and is as pale as a ghost," Ares said. He brushed a stray lock of hair from Xena's forehead. "I think she'll make it, but if she doesn't...someone's gonna pay. I need you to do something for me. Could you bring Argo back from my temple, where Xena left her? Clean her up a little?"

>"Of course, my Lord," Emerald said.

>"Okay. I'll give you the power to go there," Ares said. "Oh, and one more thing. Could you look in the saddlebags for the pieces of Xena's chakram?"

>Emerald raised an eyebrow, but nodded.

>Ares waved his hand, and she disappeared. He turned back to his unconscious warrior, sighed, and just stood there, looking at her. He finally laid down beside her, and felt her forehead. Ice cold.

>He laid his head down on the silk pillows, preparing to stay up on a vigil that would end only when Xena awoke...

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>The days went by slowly, and it tore Ares apart. Xena started to run a fever that rose to tremendous heights, and once in awhile, she would mutter or scream in her restless sleep, thrashing about on the bed. Ares would dab her face and neck with a wet cloth, and she would eventually calm down.

>"Lord Ares?" a musical voice behind him asked.

>Ares turned around. "Yes, Emerald?"

>"I found the pieces to her chakram," Emerald said. "Here they are." She handed him the broken halves.

>"Thank you, Emerald," Ares said, taking the remains in his hands.

>The priestess gave a small bow, looked at Xena worriedly, and then quietly left the room.

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>Four days later, Ares was still silently lying next to Xena. He lifted the blanket, checking on her side wound.

>He hadn't dressed her because her gash would be easier to access if he didn't. He saw that the bandage was dirty and soaked with blood. He pulled the blanket down, leaving her covered from only the waist down. He removed the bandage carefully, and dabbed the wound with a wet cloth. Before he could replace the old bandage with a new one, Xena stirred. Her dazzling blue eyes opened, and then stared at him

with confusion and bewilderment.

>"Ares?" she whispered, her tone unsure.

>"Welcome back," he said, and ran a hand down her cheek.

>She pulled away from him, trying to recall what happened. She thought for a moment, and then her eyes went wide as she remembered.

>But then her eyes narrowed as she looked down at her body. She gritted her teeth as she felt the sensation she got every time he was this close to her.

>Ares, seeing her discomfort, quickly re-bandaged the wound, replaced the blanket, and then stood up, giving her space, not wanting her to feel intimidated.

>"How do you feel?" he asked.

>She rolled her eyes. "Well, gee, I don't know, Ares. I have a pounding headache, my stomach is killing me, and this cut down my arm is stinging like crazy. How do you think I feel?! I feel like Tartarus, that's how I feel!" She shifted her position on the bed, raised an eyebrow, and added, "Although incredibly comfortable..."

>Ares grinned. "Are you hungry?"

>"Yeah. How long was I unconscious?"

>"Seven days," he answered. He waved his hand, and under the covers a black dress appeared on her body. "There's food on the table, as usual."

>She moved to rise from the bed, and her face twisted in pain. She stood up shakily, and Ares took her arm to help her balance.

>"I'm fine!" she said through clenched teeth, furious at herself for showing weakness.

>Ares frowned and let her go. "Just trying to help," he said, starting to get angry. "Sorry for even caring."

>Xena looked up at him, and her expression slowly softened. She carefully walked over to the table and looked it over. All of her favorite foods were laid out on a red satin tablecloth. She grinned and started to eat.

>Xena's grin smothered his anger somewhat, but not completely. He sat down on the bed.

>Don't I even rate a thank you?! I saved her life, and she STILL won't give me a chance! When I tried to help her she acted as if I was going to try to kill her! What does she think I'm gonna do, knife her in the back?! Why can't she understand that I CARE about her?! That I LOVE her?!

>He blinked, and an odd expression came over his face.

>What? He loved her?!

>But it made sense.

>He was in love with the woman that had started out as his student, became his warrior for a few memorable years, finally became his lover, was his obsession once he had lost her, and now caused him the most amusement. Even when they were lovers, he had never realized that he really, truly loved her.

>He looked over at Xena and pain came to his face as another realization hit him.

>Oh, gods! No wonder she hates me! No wonder she's tense when I'm around! She really was in love with me! When she left...she still loved me...it must have torn her apart! Then I tried to win her back...and she must have thought that she meant nothing to me! How is she ever going to forgive me?

>He shook his head. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you like," he offered. "Or, I could take you somewhere else if you don't want to be in my care."

>"I'll go back to Gab-" She stopped short. "Oh, gods, I forgot about Gabrielle!"

>"What do you mean?" Ares asked.

>"She was captured by the warlord that did this to me," Xena said. "I have to go back to get her." She walked over to where her armor-which Ares had already cleaned and fixed up-laid on a chair, and started to slip off her dress.

>Ares stopped her. "No. You should rest. I'll get her. What shappened? Where can I find her?"

>Xena told him about what happened and where.

>Ares moved closer to her and stroked the wound on her head lightly.

>"You're lucky you survived, Sweet," he said. He lowered his hand. "Well, I'll rescue the irritating blonde." He smiled at her slyly. "My dear, will you miss me?"

>She shook her head. "Only in your dreams, Ares. Only in your dreams."

>Ares sighed and raised an eyebrow, looking thoughtful. "Oh well. I'll be right back." He took her hand and kissed her knuckles, pressing the smooth flesh against his lips.

>Xena calmly released her hand, a small, uneasy, almost undetectable smile on her lips.

>"Go get my friend," she said.

>He bowed deeply. "Yes, your Warrior Princesship." He disappeared before she could tell him not to call her that.

>Xena stared at where he had stood. He was confusing her. Years ago, she had convinced herself that he had never loved her, but his recent actions seemed to differ. He was acting charming again-not that he hadn't before-but he seemed to be flirting with her again. Like in the old days. She had convinced herself that it was all a lie, that the love she thought she felt for him was fake. But now she realized that it wasn't. It never had been. But had he loved her? If so, then why had he hurt her and betrayed her? Why had he threatened to kill her?

>Oh, well, I'll just see what he does. Then I'll decide what to do.

>She finished the piece of meat she had started before she remembered Gabrielle, and then sat down on the bed, leaning back on her hands.

>Moments later, Ares appeared, his hand resting on Gabrielle's shoulder. The younger woman raced over to the warrior.

>"Gods, I didn't know if you got away!" Gabrielle exclaimed. "I was so worried!" Looking at the wound on her friend's head she asked, "What happened?"

>"In the battle, I was hurt. I have a gash in my side, a cut down my arm where some suicidal warrior's sword grazed it, and this." She gestured to her head. "You were captured, and I knew I couldn't fight them myself, so I left to heal my wounds. I headed down the road for hours, not finding anything. And then it started to rain. I saw Ares' temple up ahead, so I decided to go there. Not that I wanted to, of course."

>Ares scowled at her.

>She grinned sweetly and continued. "By the time I got there, I was soaked, and almost unconscious. I made it to the temple and called for him, and he appeared. I told him that if he did help me, I still wasn't coming back. And then I blacked out."

>Ares decided to add a little to her tale. "She was unconscious for seven days, in which she was delirious, kicking and screaming. She just came to today."

>Gabrielle nodded.

>Ares turned to Xena. "And Argo is in the stables here," he said.

>She nodded slowly, gratefully. She was getting even more confused.

>Gods, I wish he'd quit playing games with my heart.

>"Thanks," she murmured.

>It's about time, Ares thought.

>"Anything for you, my lovely," he said.

>She rolled her eyes. "Okay. Could you give me...world peace?" she asked cynically, getting up from her spot on the bed.

>He came up behind her and leaned close to her ear.

>Xena shivered slightly, feeling his breath on her neck.

>Does he really care about me?

>"You know you don't want world peace," Ares said. "You live for battle. If the world were without conflict, who would you be? A housewife? You know I'd never let that happen. Not to my chosen." He paused for a moment, laying his hands on her shoulders, and massaging them seductively. "You are GLORIOUS when you fight. Beautiful."

>She turned her head to look at him, a mock hurt expression on her face.

>The massage faltered for a moment, but then resumed.

>"I didn't mean it that way," he said. "You're always beautiful, but when you're fighting your eyes light up. You enjoy it, you love it, you live for it."

>As he went on, Xena thought, Oh, his touch feels so good... But I'm not going to give into that. Not until he says it first.

>Ares' voice went on, "You're unstoppable. Unbe-"

>He was cut off when Gabrielle cleared her throat.

>"Ares, this is really touching, but there is another person in the room," Gabrielle said.

>Ares glared at her, and released his grip on Xena's shoulders.

>"By the way," Ares said, "you don't have to worry about that warlord anymore. I ran him through for what he did to you."

>Xena looked away, trying to sort out her feelings.

>Why is he doing this for me? Does he really love me?

>"Well, you can go whenever you like," Ares said. "You apparently don't need my help since Gabrielle is back."

>Gabrielle studied him for a moment, but before Xena could say anything, she spoke up.

>"Can I talk to Xena alone for a moment?" she asked.

>Ares nodded and disappeared.

>"What is it?" Xena asked.

>"Did Ares offer to take care of you?" Gabrielle asked.

>"Yeah, why?"

>"He saved our lives, Xena. I think you should give him a chance. Besides, your wounds might open up and you're in no condition to fight. You might bleed to death or something, or that wound might make you light-headed."

>"Gabrielle, I can take care of myself."

>"You could yesterday, couldn't you?"

>"Why are you so eager to see me stay here?"

>"Because it's obvious that he loves you, Xena. Even Joxer could see that. I think that you should give him a chance. He deserves it."

>So, Gabrielle thinks he loves me, too?

>"He does not love me," Xena said, keeping her ground. She turned away from her friend. "He never has."

>Gabrielle was stunned. Had she detected sadness in the warrior's tone?

>"Xena, I think you're wrong. His devotion to you has never stopped. He—"

>"His devotion to me has never stopped because he wants me to be his warlord again."

>"I think it's deeper than that."

>"How could some one who put me through so much pain possibly love me?"

>"But, Xena, the people you hold most dear are always the people who can hurt you the most. Take me for example. I'm your best friend, but how much pain have I caused you?"

>Xena stayed silent.

>"You know in your heart that you care about him. You always have. And he cares about you, too. Give him a chance."

>"Gabrielle, he never loved me. I knew that from the moment he posed as my father. He was going to kill me."

>"But he couldn't bring himself to. Xena, he's the God of War. He can't help who he is. He's only acting by his nature. Maybe he has conned himself into believing that he only tries to when you back because he wants you to be his warlord. But that's not the real reason. I can tell."

>"How long do you think I should stay here, oh great Bard of Potediai?" Xena asked with a hint of sarcasm.

>"Until those wounds heal."

>"That could take weeks!"

>Gabrielle shrugged. "It's up to you, Xena."

>Xena sighed again. Perhaps he did love her. Perhaps she should give him a chance.

>"Oh...fine," she gave in.

>"Good," Gabrielle said, looking pleased with herself. "I'll meet you in Potediai."

>"Okay," Xena said. "Ares, you can come back now."

>Ares appeared in front of her.

>"Gabrielle wants to go to Potediai, and...I...thought I'd stay here with you," Xena said.

>"Okay," Ares said, hiding his surprise behind a mask of coolness. He turned to Gabrielle. "Do you want to leave now?" he asked her.

>"Yeah. Bye, Xena," she said, hugging her friend.

>"Bye, Gabrielle," Xena said.

>Ares waved his hand and Gabrielle disappeared.

>Xena walked over to the table of food and picked up a pastry.

>"Why did you decide to stay?" Ares asked.

>"Oh, I don't know," she said. "For old time's sake?"

>"I thought that you were trying to forget the 'old times', " Ares said.

>She shrugged. "Well, then I stayed because one of my wounds might open up during a fight, and, well...you can't save me every time, can you?"

>Ares was about to say something, but he felt someone praying to him. It was Veronos. He closed his eyes, looking in on his newest warlord. He cursed loudly.

>"That no-good idiot!" he said. "Strife could do better!"

>Xena had to smirk at his last comment.

>"I gotta go," Ares said. "Make yourself at home." He disappeared in

a flash of angry light.

>She finished her pastry and looked around. Bored, since there was nothing to do by herself there, she decided to relax in the hot tub. She slipped out of the nightgown and removed the bandage that wrapped around her middle, covering the wound on her side. It wasn't bad in the first place, being not even an inch deep puncture. It looked okay enough. Xena touched the bandage on her head. Deciding that she wouldn't get that part of her body wet, she slipped into the water.

>A pain shot up her side, but disappeared quickly.

>"Oh," Xena breathed. It felt so good. She closed her eyes, letting the warm water soothe her.

>She was in there for twenty minutes, until a familiar tingle ran down her back.

>"So, what happened?" she asked, and opened her eyes.

>"The moron screwed up again," Ares said, appearing in front of her and looking her over. "Doesn't really matter, they all do somehow."

>"You haven't found one good warlord since me?" she asked.

>"No," Ares said. "You have no idea how much I miss the old days." He sat down on the edge of the tub behind her and absently started to massage her shoulders and play with her hair.

>"I wish you'd respect me for who am I right now," she muttered.

>"Now, Xena, you know that I held and still do hold you in the highest respect...for many reasons," he added, his tone seductive.

>"Yeah, I'm sure," Xena said, getting the full meaning of his words. She pulled away from him and grabbed a towel, stood up, and got out. She dried herself off thoroughly.

>Ares watched his Warrior Princess from his spot on the tub.

>By the gods, she is beautiful! he thought to himself. Maybe I should tell her... Perhaps she could find it in her heart to forgive me. She has to know, one way or another. Maybe it would take some of the pain away...

>Xena sat down on the bed, only half covering herself up, because she had to re-bandage the wound. She took a clean bandage and started to wrap it tightly around her mid-section.

>Ares came up behind her on the bed, took the bandage, and finished it for her.

>"Does it still hurt?" he asked, referring to the side wound.

>"Yeah," Xena said. Ares handed her a dark blue dress, and she stood up and slipped it on. She sat back down, facing him. "Why are you doing this for me?"

>"Well...I...um," he stammered.

>Oh, yeah. Start sounding like Joxer and she's sure to swoon, he thought sarcastically.

>"Xena...remember when you led my army?" he asked.

>Xena frowned. "How could I forget?"

>"Well, Xena, were...were we...um... Were we in love?" he blurted out, sounding kind of blunt and stupid.

>Xena hesitated. "I don't know. Were we?"

>"Well, were you in love with me?"

>Xena turned away from him. After a long period of silence, she finally answered his question. "Yes." She turned back to face him. "But you never loved me." Her voice held cold accusation.

>"Yes, I did, Xena," he said.

>"No—"

>"Let me finish. I may not have realized it at the time, but I did love you. And I DO love you."

>"Ares, how can you love me? You were threatening to KILL me! You hurt me, Ares! How can you possibly sit here and lie to me? We're enemies! You DON'T love me!"

>"Xena, please let me explain," he said quietly. "I threatened to kill you, but I couldn't. Something stopped me. At the time, I figured it was because I didn't want to see the demise of my favorite warrior, but my assumption was wrong. I'm in love with you, and I always will be, no matter how many times you reject me. I'm not asking you to forgive me, I just thought you should know."

>She studied his face, looking for some indication that his confession was a lie. What she found surprised her. Things she had never seen in Ares before. Pain, sorrow, remorse, sadness, guilt, disappointment, and...loneliness?

>"You really love me?" she asked.

>"Have I ever lied to you?"

>"No."

>"You should get some rest," he said, changing the subject.

>Ares motioned for her to lay down, and she did so.

>"Get some sleep," he said, and started to move about the room restlessly.

>Xena watched him from the bed.

>"Care to join me?" she asked finally.

>"I trust that you're joking," he said.

>"No, I wasn't," she said. "But, if you'd rather not..." She shrugged.

>Ares managed a half grin, and laid down next to her.

>Xena studied him and bit her lower lip thoughtfully. "Ares, I...well...I still love you, too..." She trailed off.

>She loves me?! How could she love me? Like she said before, I've hurt her. How could she forgive me?

>"Do you forgive me for...uh...threatening to hurt-kill you?" he asked.

>"Jeez, can I be anymore blunt? he thought sarcastically.

>She looked at him for a long time. "Yes."

>Thank the gods!

>"I'm so sorry, Xena," Ares said. "I didn't realize what I had until I lost it."

>Xena turned onto her side, facing the opposite direction. "Good night...er...day...whatever this is. Can't really tell up here."

>"Pleasant dreams, Princess," Ares said. He hesitated, not knowing if she would find fault with him if he tried to hold her.

>It's worth a shot.

>Xena felt Ares' arms wrap around her and tensed slightly, but calmed herself and sighed contentedly, instead of balling him out. She easily fell asleep.

>Ares smiled and moved closer to her, luxuriating in the feel of her body near his.

>"Oh, my beautiful Warrior Princess, Ares thought. How I've longed to hold you in my arms.

>">(((((((((

>When Xena woke up, she saw that she was alone. She found herself slightly disappointed, and shook her head at realizing this. She felt ridiculous. What did she see in him, anyway? Why did she want him

around?

>The answer: because she loved his company. She loved the way that he teased her. Because she loved that devilish grin of his. If only he wasn't evil-no, if only he didn't fight for the wrong side. He wasn't evil. She stood up and stretched. She walked over to get something to eat, and something caught her eye. By the bottle of wine laid a red rose and a scroll. She opened the scroll carefully.

>
Xena-

>
I had hoped to be here when you awoke, but I'm afraid that I couldn't. Veronos somehow managed to screw up the plans again, and lost an important battle, so now we're behind, and I have total chaos to deal with. If you get bored without my dangerously exciting presence, remember that by thinking of someone, their image will appear in the mirror beside the bed. Feel free to wander around my palace. Emerald is still here, if you'd like to talk to her. You two seemed to be good friends the last time you were here. I'll be back as soon as I can get Veronos straightened out.

>
-Forever Yours Devoted,

>
Ares

>
PS: Try not to miss me too much!

>

>Xena grinned as she read the last line.

>She thought back to Emerald, a priestess of Ares. All gods and goddesses picked special priests or priestesses to serve at their palace, away from the mortal world.

>You'd have to be pretty devoted to agree to leave your friends and family just to come up here and serve someone.

>But, Ares was exceptional in that area, surprisingly. Unlike the other gods, he didn't constantly order his priestesses around. Half of the time, the people who served at his palace were free to do as they pleased. As with Xena, he teased and taunted them, and he knew everything about them, and he was the only god that had befriended them all. They were some of the few people that could make Ares forget himself and have fun. When he did order them to do something, it wasn't really an order. More like a request. However, there were those times when he was really angry at something or someone, and went around yelling at everyone, finding fault in the most simple things. But afterwards, he apologized, and was always forgiven.

>Anyway, Emerald was an old friend that she had acquired on one of her many visits here. She'd go to find her after she checked to see what Ares was doing. She slowly made her way to the mirror and thought of him. Ares' image quickly replaced her own.

>He was really angry. As far as she could tell, he was shouting at Veronos, and the warlord didn't seem to be very happy at being talked to like that, not even by a god. Ares kept shouting at him, making irritated gestures and inclining his head to the map.

>Xena frowned. "Calm down," she whispered.

>Ares stopped suddenly in mid sentence, casting an odd expression skyward. He calmed down visibly, and pointed to the map, his tone now normal.

>Xena rose a confused eyebrow. Had he heard her? How? She shook her head. They had been-no, they were close, and would forever share a bond.

>She moved away from the mirror, and looked through the chest of clothes. Everything was made to fit her perfectly, cling to every curve. She pulled out a ruby-red silk dress that Ares had liked before. She slipped it on and brushed her hair.

>That finished, she picked up a pastry, ate it, and headed out of Ares' bedchamber. She walked down the hallways, stopping to chat

every once in awhile with a priestess that she knew, and sometimes stopping to rest. The wounds had taken their toll. When she entered the Great Hall, she stopped short.

>There, just yards in front of her, three huskies walked down the hallway, watching everyone carefully. Seeing her, they stopped also, eyeing her warily. Finally recognizing her, the maliciousness left their features. They walked up to her and lovingly nudged her with their noses.

>"Lilia, Tarisma, Calyn?!" Xena exclaimed. "It's good to see you again, girls!" She pet each one affectionately, rubbing behind their ears.

>"Xena?" a voice called.

>Xena turned to see a woman with long red hair running towards her.

>"Emerald!" Xena exclaimed as she embraced the younger woman.

>Emerald released her and stepped back, smiling.

>"You're alive!" Emerald exclaimed.

>"Yeah," Xena said, returning the smile warmly.

>"So tall, dark, and handsome saved you again, huh?" Emerald asked, raising an eyebrow and flashing a brilliant grin.

>"Yeah, he did," Xena said.

>Emerald studied her carefully. "Have you two made up?"

>"Mmm hmm," Xena said, nodding. "He... He told me that he loves me."

>"It's about time," Emerald said. "You look surprised. I thought you knew he loved you already."

>"I conned myself into believing he didn't. After all, he didn't know until a little while ago," Xena said.

>"Do you love him?"

>Xena hesitated, and Emerald nodded encouragingly. "Yes, yes you do! You know it!" she accused.

>Xena shrugged and gave in. "Yeah, I guess I do love him. I...always have."

>"Well, we have a lot of catching up to do," Emerald said.

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>Xena shut the door behind her. Ares still hadn't shown up, and she was getting ready for bed. She gave her hair a couple of quick strokes, and walked over to the mirror. Ares' image appeared in front of her.

>He was out on a battlefield talking to Veronos and two other men, shifting from foot to foot. Xena, who knew him better than anyone, could tell that he would have rather been anywhere but there at that time.

>She sighed unhappily and laid down on the silk laden bed. After an hour of tossing and turning, she finally fell asleep...

>)((((((((((

>She awoke in the middle of the night to find Ares getting situated beside her.

>"Hi," she whispered.

>"Sorry," Ares apologized. "I didn't mean to wake you."

>"That's okay," Xena said. "Did everything work out fine?"

>"It's straightened out-for now," he said, once he was laying down comfortably beside her. "I'm sorry I was gone so long. How do you feel?"

>"I get a headache every once in awhile, but other than that, I'm

fine," Xena said. "Thanks to you."
>Ares removed the bandage to examine her head wound. He stroked it lightly.
>"It still looks pretty bad, but your beauty doesn't falter," he said. He kissed the wound gently, and covered it with the bandage again. "Did you talk to Emerald today?"
>"Yeah. And I saw Lilia, Tarisma, and Calyn, too," Xena said. "Ares, I was watching you this morning in the mirror, when you were yelling at Veronos. I whispered 'calm down', and you did. Did you hear me?"
>"Yeah, I think I somehow did," Ares said. "We share a bond because of how close we are."
>"That's what I thought," Xena said.
>Ares studied her appreciatively. "I love that dress. You look beautiful."
>"I remembered that this was one of your favorites," Xena said.
>"What can I say? You look radiant in red."
>Xena smiled. "You flatterer."
>"You deserve every bit of it," Ares said.
>Xena smiled again and turned onto her side so that he could hold her. He happily obliged.
>"It feels so good to be in your arms again," she whispered softly.
>~*~
>Ares woke up to find Xena still in his arms. He smiled and carefully stood up, trying not to wake the sleeping warrior. He kissed her forehead and walked over to the mirror. He looked through the recent wars, and stopped at Veronos. So far so good. If only he could keep it up.
>"Ares?" a voice asked softly behind him.
>Ares turned and smiled warmly at the waking woman on his bed.
>"Did you sleep well?" he asked.
>"Mmm hmm," Xena replied as she stretched.
>Ares took her hand as she stood up, and kissed it gently.
>"How's Veronos doing?" she asked, eyeing the mirror.
>"Fine," Ares said.
>"I hope you don't have to leave again," Xena said.
>"So you enjoy my company?" Ares asked.
>"Oh...put up with...tolerate...enjoy. Call it what you will," Xena teased.
>"Actually, I think that you more than tolerate my company," Ares said. He pulled her closer and gazed at her with longing. He moved to kiss her, but she pulled away before he could.
>"Ares, I...," she trailed off, unsure of how to continue.
>"I'm sorry," Ares apologized quickly, letting her go. "I just...thought that..." He shook his head and shrugged, feeling foolish. "Sorry." He awkwardly turned back to the mirror, watching Veronos.
>She could tell that she'd hurt him by pulling away.
>">Now why did I do that? He loves me. I love him. What's wrong with him kissing me?
>She looked at him, and could tell that he felt like an idiot for doing that.
>She sighed and stepped between him and the mirror.
>"I'm sorry," he started to apologize. "It was stupid-"
>He was cut off as her right hand slid up his jaw and she kissed him

deeply.
>"I'll never have you figured out, will I?" Ares asked, once they'd parted.
>"Never," Xena replied. She went over to the chest and started searching for a clean dress. Once she'd found one that she liked, she turned back to Ares and said, "Turn around."
>"Oh, come on, Xena," Ares protested, his lips forming an affectionate pout.
>"Turn around," Xena repeated.
>"Nothing I haven't seen before," Ares mumbled, but turned.

>Xena slipped the dress on. It was a green long-sleeved dress with a none too modest neckline. She brushed through her hair quickly and said, "Okay. You can turn back around."
>Ares did as he was told, and his eyes grew wide, taking in the fantastic dress and the woman who wore it.
>"You're even more beautiful than Aphrodite," he whispered.

>"Ex-squeeze me?" a voice exclaimed. Aphrodite appeared in the middle of the room. "She's more beautiful than me?"
>"You heard me," Ares said.
>"That's, like, so totally unfair! No mortal is more beautiful than the Goddess of Love!" Aphrodite said.
>"Ah, but this is no mere mortal," Ares said. "This is Xena."

>"Ar, you are really-and I mean really-head over heals, aren't you?" Aphrodite asked. She shook her head and disappeared with a small smile on her face.
>"Anyway, as I was saying," he came up behind Xena and put his arms around her waist, "you look magnificent."
>"I would think you'd prefer the leather look, being the God of War and all," Xena said.
>"I have weaknesses, too," Ares said. "And you're one of them, especially in a tight dress." He started to kiss her neck.

>She considered stopping him, but found no good reason to. She smothered the idea quickly.
>"What are you doing? Stop him! This is Ares who is kissing you! Ares! As in 'God of War' Ares! He's your enemy, for the Gods' sakes.

>But at that moment, his motives weren't evil. They were driven by love. Minus the fact that he fought for the wrong side, he never was really all that bad. You had to admit he was good looking. And seductive.
>"Arrogant and obnoxious.
>"Smooth talking and handsome.
>"Self absorbed and annoying.
>"Sweet and passionate.
>"Spiteful and deceiving.

>She shook her head, annoyed with herself. She allowed his lips to travel up to her ear, nibbling it playfully.
>"How long are you planning on staying?" he asked.
>"Oh, I don't know. Why?" she asked.
>"Just wondering how long I have to enjoy this," he whispered.

>"I'll probably only stay until my wounds heal," she said. "There are people who need my help."
>"I'd let the world live in peace, if only you'd stay here with me," he said.
>"What?" she asked, not sure if she'd heard correctly.

>"You heard me," he said.

>Now she was starting to doubt his sanity.

>"You wouldn't do that," she said.

>"Yes, I would," he said. "As I said before, you're a weakness."

>"I can't stay here forever," she said.

>"Sure you can," he said.

>"What about Gabrielle? And my other friends and family?" she asked.

>He sighed, longing in his eyes once more.

>"Well, if you can't stay here with me for eternity, let's enjoy the time that we have." He kissed her passionately.

>"Not right now," she said, breaking the kiss.

>His lips formed into another affectionate pout, and for a moment she lost herself in his deep brown eyes. She quickly pulled herself out of the trance, and said, "Maybe you should help me on swordplay. I'm probably as clumsy with a sword as Joxer now. I haven't picked one up for days."

>He nodded his head in agreement, and before she knew it, they were on a riverbank by a waterfall.

>She gasped in amazement. The sight was breathtaking. In front of her was a waterfall, leading into a river. Behind her laid the woods, the trees tall and green, their fruits ripe and tempting.

>She glanced down and realized that she was back in her battle dress.

>He drew his sword and she did the same. It felt heavy in her hands, and she felt disgusted with herself.

>"Let's see if you still have 'many skills', my dear," Ares said, and they started their fight.

>They started slowly, and got faster as they went. She flipped and landed behind him, twisting her ankle as she did so. She cursed as the pain went through her leg, and he waited patiently for her to recover. Soon, her muscles relaxed as her confidence returned. He cornered her into a small space, the forest directly behind her, and Ares just in front of her, giving her hardly any room. She glanced behind her, and ran towards the nearest tree, planning to flip off of it and over her mentor's head. Her plan failed, however. She didn't get enough momentum to get high enough to flip. She fell, landing painfully on her back.

>Though concern rang through his mind, Ares couldn't help but smirk.

>Xena closed her eyes and cursed again, her confidence draining. She opened her eyes and found him trying not to laugh. That made her mad. She cast him a dirty look and called him a none too complimentary name.

>"You shouldn't be mad at me," he said. "It's not my fault you didn't make that flip."

>She glared at him as he offered her his hand, but took it and rose quickly.

>He laughed quietly at her desperate attempts to look somewhat regal, and got a glare and another uncomplimentary name in return. He sobered quickly, realizing that her dignity had really taken a plunge. His concern came back full-force when he saw her limp to retrieve her sword.

>"Are you hurt?" he asked softly, following behind her.

>"I'm fine," she snapped. She stopped limping and made sure that he couldn't see her face as it winced in pain.

>"Xe-"

>"I said 'I'm fine'!" she shouted, and then immediately regretted it.

>"All right," he said quietly, and went to sit on the riverbank. He laid down on his side in the grass, staring out across the water, watching the waves, and letting the sounds of the waterfall fill his ears in a comforting song.

>Xena closed her eyes, scolding herself for getting irritated so easily. She took a deep breath and walked over to him. She sat down beside him. When he refused to look at her, she hung her head in shame.

>"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just that I feel ridiculous because I couldn't make that flip. I shouldn't have let it get me angry."

>He continued to look across the water.

>"Ya know, I can't believe that you haven't lost your temper with me yet," she said.

>He finally spoke. "And blow another chance with you?"

>"I wouldn't blame you if you did," she said, relieved that she got him talking. "I am hurt, by the way."

>"Where?"

>"My ankle, and my back where I landed on it," she answered.

>Ares sat up and took her ankle in his hand gently. He removed her boot and massaged the swollen area.

>Xena grimaced. "I can't believe I didn't make that flip."

>"You've been weak for a couple of days," Ares said. "But the other reason you didn't make it is because you weren't focused. You were afraid that you wouldn't make it, and your confidence faltered. You'd have felt ridiculous if you hadn't have made it in front of anyone, but especially in my presence. You're afraid of looking weak in front of me. You're always tense when I'm around, and you feel that you have to prove something." He paused, letting go of her ankle. "But you have nothing to prove to me, Xena. Nothing. I already know that you're the most skilled, strong willed, smart, and beautiful woman in the world. Mortal or goddess. Xena, remember when you use to train with me? When we trained together, you never let your dignity get in the way. You use to let it go. We laughed together, and we had fun. Even though the task was a serious one, you were never tense around me. If you fell, you got back up and laughed it off. You had no reason to be embarrassed, and no reason to be nervous, so you hardly ever got hurt. You have to trust me again, Xena, and trust the fact that I won't think any less of you if you fail. You can rely on me, Xena."

>Xena sighed. "It's just that we've been enemies for so long...and it's hard to change the habits that I've started."

>"I never thought of you as an enemy, my dear," Ares said. "How about we take care of your back, and then come back and finish your exercise?"

>"Okay," she agreed. They stood up and she put her hand in his. They disappeared from the riverbank, and reappeared in his bedchamber. She was back in the green dress that she had on before.

>"Lay down on your stomach on the bed," he instructed.

>She did as she was told, and he sat down beside her. He slipped the dress off of her shoulders, and felt her body tense under his touch.

>"Trust me," he whispered. He caressed her back gently, waiting patiently for her to relax

>She did, finally.

>"Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "You have a couple bruises and scratches, and that's about it." He started to massage her back and shoulders, kneading the flesh sensually.

>She sighed and closed her eyes. "Oh, gods, Ares," she breathed. It felt so good. She'd forgotten how gentle his touch could be.

>When his hands stopped, he slipped her dress back over her shoulders, and she turned onto her back to face him.

>"Better?" he asked.

>"Yes," she said.

>"Shall we go back to the lake and finish?" he asked.

>"Sure," she answered.

>)((((((((((

>"I think that that's enough practice for today," Ares said, seeing that Xena was about to collapse from exhaustion.

>Xena, sweat pouring down her face, nodded in agreement.

>"A little overheated, are we?" Ares asked.

>"A little," she replied, trying to catch her breath.

>He grinned slyly, and without warning swept her off of her feet and into his arms, with a thought made her armor disappear, leaving her only in her shift, and tossed her smoothly into the river.

>She realized what was happening seconds before she hit the water, and had enough time to take a deep breath.

>She surfaced quickly. "You..." She choked and went into a coughing fit.

>He laughed.

>"This water is freezing!" she declared, glaring at him as he laughed.

>She swam to the shore and got out. She stood next to him, shivering.

>"Oh, you think it's funny, do ya?" she asked.

>He nodded, laughing. He barely caught a glimpse of the mischievous glint in her eye, and found himself falling. Using his powers, he made his vest disappear before he hit the water.

>He surfaced, coughing and spluttering.

>Now it was her turn to laugh.

>He swam to the shore and got out, shivering.

>"That was low," he said.

>"Can't handle getting it right back at ya?" she asked.

>He glared at her, but a smile teased his lips. Seconds later, he was dry again, and his vest returned. He made no move to help her.

>"So you're just gonna leave me like this?" she asked.

>"You deserve it, don't you?" he asked, but moments later, returned her to her armor, dry.

>"That's better," she said.

>"Now that we've cooled off, shall we go back?" he asked.

>She nodded, and they appeared in his bedchamber once more.

>He quickly strode over to the mirror, and Veronos' image appeared, looking near dead. He was chained to a prison wall, and a man stood beside him, beating him.

>Ares cursed. "How on Zeus' green earth could he have lost?! How?! He had the perfect battle plan!" Ares roared, outraged.

>Xena walked over to him calmly, and her hand took his chin, forcing his eyes to meet hers.

>"Calm down," she ordered.

>Ares took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. They gazed back at him intensely, and he felt his anger fade instantly.

>"Don't take your anger out on him," she said. "It's not his fault that he's incapable. If you're angry at anybody, it should be me,

because I was preoccupying you when you should have been watching over your battles. Besides, at least I stand a fighting chance."

>"I've never fought my best against you, Xena," Ares said. "If I had, you'd be dead by now."

>"So, you're saying that when I battled you in the Temple of the Furies, you weren't fighting your best?" she asked.

>"Of course not," Ares said. "You won easily. You thought I was really that bad?"

>Now that irritated her. It hadn't been an easy win, especially since the Furies had persecuted her to madness, and she had to fight dealing with it.

>"That means you let me win," she said. "Why? What was the point of getting the Furies involved?"

>"I reconsidered the outcome of my plan. Have you back and destroy all of the things that I love about you, or let you win and try again," Ares said.

>They stood in silence for awhile.

>"So, are you going to rescue Veronos?" Xena asked finally, glancing at the mirror.

>"No. Why, do you think I should?" Ares asked.

>"Since when have you ever cared about what I thought?" Xena asked.

>"I've always cared about your opinion," Ares said.

>"Doesn't seem like it," she muttered. "And, no, I don't think that Veronos should die, but I suppose he doesn't deserve any special treatment from you. It wouldn't be fair."

>"But I give you special treatment," Ares said. "Is that fair?"

>"No," Xena said. "Not to me," she added playfully.

>"So you want me to stop helping you?" he asked. "It's only fair."

>She thought for a moment, trying to find an answer. She looked at him for a moment, her eyes moving up and down his body. A wave of desire passed through her as she took in his dark, brown eyes, trim beard, short raven hair, attractive (to say the least) leather outfit, and provoking lips. She allowed her mind to travel into the past, remembering those unforgettable nights...

>She moved closer to him. "At least I can repay you," she whispered, pressing her body against him. She started to kiss his throat with soft, mesmerizing touches.

>Ares' eyes widened in pleased surprise as his warrior continued to tease him with her light caresses.

>When she thought she had given his throat adequate attention, she brushed his lips with her own. Why they broke the kiss, she looked at him, eyes full of mischief.

>"Will this repay you enough?" she asked.

>"Oh, I don't know," he said slyly. "Maybe you--"

>He was cut off as her lips recaptured his.

>)((((((((((

>When she woke up, she sighed, remembering what she had done.

>How could I? Why did I?

>She frowned and turned over to look at the man next to her. He was already awake, watching her. She stopped frowning swiftly, hoping he didn't see it. But he did.

>"What's wrong?" he whispered. "I truly hope you don't regret your actions."

>"I don't," she said, not really sure of herself.

>We love each other. Nothing was wrong with it.

>"I'm glad to hear that," he said, fondling her neck gently. When she didn't smile at his touch like she usually did, he stopped and frowned. She was staring off into space. "What's wrong?"

>She blinked out of the trance. "Nothing," she said quickly. "I'm fine."

>"You do regret it, don't you?" he asked, a bitter edge in his voice.

>"No!" she said. He gave her a penetrating gaze and she sighed, frustrated. "I don't know. I'm confused, Ares. We're supposed to be enemies, and I'm supposed to hate you."

>"It doesn't have to be that way," he said gently. "We don't have to be enemies. Neither of us are entirely good, or entirely bad. And after this...I hoped that we could be on the same side. I only tormented you all those years because...I just wanted you back. But I understand now. We don't have to be enemies, even if we don't fight for the same things. I won't torment you anymore, and I'm going to try not to be so cold-hearted. Perhaps I'll then have a chance. You've inspired so much change in me, Xena. You've shown me how to love. You've proved that the God of War has a heart, and you have won it in the process. I love you, Xena. And, if you truly love me, too, what we did wasn't wrong."

>"Ares," she said, "I do love you."

>"Then what's wrong?" Ares asked.

>Xena sighed and grinned at him. "Nothing, I guess."

>"Good," he said, and kissed her full lips. He then moved to her neck.

>She lifted her chin eagerly, allowing him better access.

>When he was finished with her neck, he moved to kiss the flesh about the neckline of her dress.

>A soft cry of pleasure left her lips. Nobody could equal him. He was the only one who could make her feel this way.

>He lifted his head and kissed her lips again.

>When they parted, Xena laid her head against his shoulder, her index finger idly tracing patterns on his bare chest.

>"I wish that I could stay here with you forever," she whispered.

>"But you can, Xena," he said, running his fingers through her long, raven hair. "I'm willing to do anything for you. I'll let the world live in peace, and you would have nothing to worry about. You wouldn't have to be on guard everyday. You could stay here with me for eternity." His voice became deep and serious now. "I could make you a goddess."

>Startled, she jerked away from him. "You couldn't do that. The other gods wouldn't approve."

>"I don't care what they think," he said. "I just want to be with you."

>"Ares...I can't," Xena said. "What about Gabrielle? What about my friends, and what's left of my family?"

>He looked at her silently, disappointed beyond words. He had finally asked her, and she'd refused. But, what had he expected?

>"If they are the most important things in your life...then so be it," he said. "You can't stay here with me if you want to be with them. It isn't possible. As soon as your wounds heal, you can go back to the bard."

>He rose from the bed and put his vest on, trying to hide the pain that this mortal was causing him.

>Xena suddenly felt tired, even after the long sleep she had. She wanted to comfort Ares, to tell him that she would become a goddess

and live with him forever. But she couldn't. In her heart, that's what she truly wanted. But she couldn't have it.

>She let out a weary sigh. Life was so confusing. Seconds later, she found she had tears in her eyes. She was crying.

>She felt disgusted with herself again. What was she doing? Warrior Princesses' did not cry.

>Pull yourself together! What are you doing? Why are you crying?

>That was her mind screaming at her, but her heart answered with just as much force.

>Why am I crying? Why am I crying?! Maybe because I'm confused. Maybe because life is unfair. Maybe because I can't be with the man I love!

>The feel of warm, bare arms wrapping around her shoulders in a protective embrace snapped her out of her miserable fight with herself.

>"It's okay, Xena. It's okay," the god's soothing voice assured. "Don't cry, Xena. It'll be okay." He held her tightly, and ran his fingers through her hair, whispering assurances in her ear.

>She stopped crying and allowed Ares to rock her gently, his mere touch comforting.

>Ares rested his chin on her shoulder. "Are you okay now?"

>"Yeah," she said.

>"It torments me to see you unhappy," he said. "What is it you really want?"

>"I want to be with you...and with Gabrielle," Xena said. "Like you said, it isn't possible."

>He didn't know what to say. Nothing he could offer would be comforting.

>"I guess we should just enjoy the time we have," she said. "Though I can't think of anything more enjoyable than being in your arms."

>He smiled and kissed her cheek. "And I can't think of anything more enjoyable than having you in my arms. Except for maybe..." He let his sentence drop off as he nibbled her ear suggestively.

>She smiled and rolled her eyes, pulling away from him.

>"Is that the only thing on your mind?" she asked.

>"No," he said, but his eyes begged her to come back over.

>She shook her head. "Not right now," she said.

>"Then, shall we go out for your morning exercise?" he asked.

>"Sure," she said, and they disappeared.

>)((((((((((

>
Yes! Finally, she made the flip!

>
He flashed her a smile, which she returned.

>
They had been there for ten minutes, and she'd improved a lot since yesterday. She was getting better every second.

>
A half an hour later, the battle was over. As their swords struck, Xena put so much force into hers that it stunned him for a moment. She took that opportunity to kick him in the stomach, sending him falling backwards. She quickly pinned him down.

>
"I win," she said triumphantly, trying to catch her breath. He rose an eyebrow and cast her a sly grin, and before she knew what was happening, he was on top of her.

>
She sighed, annoyed that she'd let her guard down.

>
He grinned at her sheepishly, and rested his head on his hand

lazily.

>
"You shouldn't let your guard slip so easily," he said.

>
"I usually don't," she muttered.

>
"Looks like I'm a weakness, too, huh?" Ares asked. "Your guard slipped because you thought you had me beat. Or...maybe you had me right where you wanted me."

>
"I'll go with the first one," Xena said dryly.

>
Ares arched an eyebrow and shrugged, knowing she'd say that. He shifted his position, crossing his arms and laying his head on them, the weight on her breastplate.

>
"Hmmmm...I could get use to this," he said.

>
Getting a warning look, he sighed and stood up. "Can't blame me for trying." He pulled her to her feet beside him, and kissed her hand before releasing it.

>
"Well, you've had your morning workout, so do you think we could...move on?" he asked, while sheathing his sword.

>
She looked at him with amusement in her eyes.

>
"Just drop it for now," she said, and walked towards the river. She shed her armor, leaving only her shift, and waded into the water. The water felt nice and cool against her skin after the workout.

Ares, of course, showed no sign of exhaustion since he was a god. But she, however, was mortal, and after fighting the God of War, she was worn out, tired, and sweating nearly to death.

>
She glanced back at the shore. He had sat down on the soft river bank, waiting for her to finish.

>
When she was done, she walked to shore, wringing the water out of her hair. She sat down next to Ares.

>
"Well, your fighting is as good as usual already, and your wounds are healing nicely," Ares said. "You should probably go back to Gabrielle soon."

>
"That's not really what you want," Xena said. "Besides, you could help me improve my skills."

>
He grinned at her charmingly. "It's hard to improve perfection."

>
She smiled. "Flatterer."

>
"I can do a lot more than flatter..." Ares said suggestively.

>
"I said 'drop it'!" she exclaimed, exasperated.

>
"Fine, fine!" he said. "I give up!"

>
"It's about time," she said. "And I thought I was stubborn!"

>
He laughed, and they appeared in the palace again.

>
Xena walked over to the mirror, and Gabrielle's image appeared. She was laughing with Lila, they seemed to be having a good time. Seconds later, Hercules' and Iolaus' images replaced Gabrielle's. They were in a palace, talking to some brown-haired woman with a peculiar hairstyle wearing a red and blue dress.

>
Xena looked at Hercules unhappily. How could she ever explain what was happening to him? He'd never forgive her. Ares had killed his wife, after all.

>
Ares glanced at her, reading her thoughts.

>
"I don't think you'll want to tell him. He won't accept it lightly."

>
Xena turned to him. "Yeah, I know. But we've been fighting against each other for so long that I don't think anyone will believe that your intentions are good."

>
"You believe me, right?" Ares asked.

>
"Of course I do," Xena said. "I know you're telling the truth." She kissed him. "I'm going to find Emerald. Care to come with me?"

>
"Sure," Ares said, and they walked out of the bedchamber.

>
Once outside the door, they say Tarisma about halfway down the hallway.

>
"Here, Tarisma!" Ares called, beckoning to his pet.

>
Tarisma's eyes lit up when she saw that her lord was in a good mood. She ran down the hallway towards them, and jumped up on her master playfully.

>
"Hey, girl!" Ares said, stroking the nape of her neck fondly.

>
Tarisma licked Ares' hand, and then ran to Xena, jumping up on her also.

>
After playing with Tarisma for awhile, they headed on down the hallway. They found Emerald in the Great Hall, laughing with another priestess. As Xena and Ares approached, the two women turned to them.

>
"Xena! Lord Ares! Hello!" Emerald said, bowing her head slightly to Ares. The other priestess did the same.

>
"No need for the formalities, Emerald, Sara," Ares said.

>
"How's the new warlord working out?" Sara asked.

>
"He's dead," Ares told them. "I gave him the perfect battle plan, and he still found a way to screw it up." His voice was calm, seeming as if he didn't even care. And he didn't. After all, his Princess was with him, nothing else mattered.

>
"Too bad he lost," Emerald said.

>
"Yeah, too bad," Sara agreed.

>
Emerald turned her gaze to Xena. "How long were you planning on gracing us with your presence?"

>
Xena looked at Ares, sadness visible in her light blue eyes.
"I'll probably be leaving tomorrow."

>
Emerald's face fell, as did Sara's. "I wish we could persuade you to stay longer."

>
"I have to get back. People need me," Xena explained. "Don't worry, I'll probably visit more frequently than I have been lately."

>
"Please do," Sara said. "We've missed you around here. And Ares was becoming incredibly grouchy..." She smirked at her Lord.

>
"Grouchy?! Me?! Nah," Ares said jokingly.

>
They all laughed.

>
Awhile later, Ares looked at Xena and said, "Well, my dear, you haven't eaten anything. What's say we go back to the waterfall and dine there?"

>
"Sounds good to me," Xena agreed. "Talk to ya later, guys."

>
"Bye."

>
Ares slipped his arms around Xena's waist, and moments later they were by the waterfall again. A mouthwatering meal was laid out on a red silk sheet on the riverbank.

>
Xena sat down on the edge of the sheet, and Ares sat down beside her.

>
"It looks delicious," Xena said, and started to serve herself, knowing that gods didn't have to eat.

>
"So, you're going to be leaving tomorrow?" Ares asked quietly.

>
Xena wouldn't look him in the eyes, for fear that her emotions would get the better of her. "Yeah," she said. "People need me."

>
"But I need you," Ares said, taking her chin, forcing her eyes to meet his. "Please, Xena, I need you. I can't live without you." He moved closer, and his lips met hers. She sat down her plate, not breaking the kiss. Her arms entwined behind his neck as she pulled him closer.

>
When they parted, Xena whispered, pain in her voice, "Oh, gods, Ares! I need you, too!"

>
He let her go, and ran a hand down her cheek. "Well, then we have some thinking to do."

>
"How is this going to work? It's impossible for us to be together," Xena said.

>
"Uh oh! When you start to get pessimistic, we know there's trouble," Ares teased.

>
She couldn't help but laugh.

>
"So, what are we going to do?" she asked.

>
"I don't know," he said. "We'll think of something. Let's see...you won't become a goddess because you don't want to leave the irri-Gabrielle, right?"

>
She grinned at his sudden correction and replied, "Yeah. And because people need me." She shrugged, looking wishful. "There's really no way for us to be together."

>
They sat in silence for awhile, until Ares spoke up, giving her a half smile. "Unless..." He thought it over for a few more seconds. "Now, I know this isn't the grandest solution ever, but it's better than nothing. You go back to Gabrielle, and when you die—which probably won't be for a long time—you can come back to me, and we...can take up where we left off."

>
She considered for a moment.

>
"And then you wouldn't have to worry about war in the world, because you'd be in the Elysian Fields, anyway, and wouldn't be able to help them in the first place," Ares added.

>
Xena smiled at him. "Looks like we have a plan. One question, though: Do I get my young body back?"

>
"Yeah," Ares said. "You'll look like you do right now."

>
"For your sake or for mine?"

>
He grinned at her—that oh-so-tempting grin that practically made your heart melt.

>
He poured her a glass of wine, and then one for himself, the blood red mixture glistening in the golden sunlight. (Mind you, gods don't have to eat/drink, but they can if they want to.)

>
"To us?" he asked.

>
She nodded, and they clinked glasses.

>
"To us," she said, and took a sip. She swallowed slowly and recognized the taste. They were drinking the same type of wine they had drank years before, the night he had given her the chakram. She gave him a small smile, and laid back on her free hand.

>
She sat the glass down and asked him, "You are going to visit once in awhile, aren't you?"

>
"Of course I will," Ares said. "We have to keep your life lively, don't we?"

>
They talked awhile longer, straightening out the details of their plan, she eating slowly as they conversed. When she was finished, she stretched out on the luxuriously soft knoll, on her side, facing the waterfall. He followed silently, wrapping an arm around her waist. She sighed sadly, thinking about the painful good-bye she would have to say tomorrow.

>
She snuggled closer to him, wishing with all of her heart that she could stay right there with him forever. When she felt his warm

breath as he exhaled softly on the back of her neck, a smile found its way to her lips.

>
"Maybe I could stay for a couple more days," she murmured. She turned to face him. "I'll stay for one more day, and then leave in the morning."

>
"Good," he stated simply, and she laid her head back down.

>
She watched as the sun sank lower, and the sky became pink. The peaceful sound of grasshoppers and locusts presently combined with the roar of the waterfall.

>
When they could no longer see any trace of the sun, Ares asked softly, "Shall we?"

>
She said nothing, but nodded, and then found herself lying on his bed. He kissed the top of her head. "Sweet dreams, my love," he whispered.

>
Feeling both happy and safe, she easily fell into a deep slumber.

>
~*~

>

>"Mmm," she moaned softly as her eyes opened. The feel of a warm, familiar body pressed against her back brought a smile to her lips once again.

>How am I supposed to leave him?

>She turned over to face him and saw that he was still sleeping.

>"Ares," she whispered in his ear.

>His eyes opened and he smiled when he saw her.

>"Good morning," he whispered.

>"Morning," she replied. She wrapped her arms around him, and he did the same, pulling her closer. Their lips met and didn't part for a long time. When they did, he continued to hold her close, and her body relaxed, happy to be in his arms.

>Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and an old man appeared in the middle of the bedchamber.

>Ares looked up in surprise, which turned into annoyance when he realized who it was.

>"Dad, I'm kinda busy!" he said.

>"Who's this?" Zeus asked, ignoring his son's statement.

>Ares got up from the bed, and Xena followed.

>"This is Xena," Ares said, by way of introduction. "Zeus, Xena. Xena, Zeus."

>"What is a mortal doing in your palace?" Zeus asked.

>"Oh, I don't know. Like father, like son?" Ares mocked cockily.

>Xena held back a smirk while Zeus glared at his offspring.

>"Xena's been here before, so why are you so interested in her now?" Ares asked.

>"Because she was a warlord on her previous visits," Zeus said. "You are neglecting your duties, Ares. This obsession must stop."

>Ares looked at Xena and grinned. "Never gonna happen," he said. "But she is leaving tomorrow."

>"Good," Zeus said. He paused. "Though you are in the wrong, Ares," he said, looking from his son to Xena, and then back to his son, "it's about time." With that said, he disappeared.

>Ares glared after him.

>"What did you want me to do, bring her here against her will?" Ares said under his breath. "I'd never do that."

>"What was that?" Xena asked.

>"Nothing."

>"Does all of Olympus know about me?" Xena asked.

>Ares shrugged. "Hey, I love to talk about you. It's my favorite subject."

>)((((((((())))))(

>"Well, we should get some sleep," he said. They stood up, and he swept her off of her feet smoothly. They appeared in his bedchamber, and he laid her down on the soft bed. He kissed her cheek, and then stretched out beside her.

>"You're really going to leave in the morning?" he asked quietly, disappointment obvious in his tone.

>"Yeah," she said. Seeing his depressed look, she added reassuringly, "Hey, the years will go by in a flash. Besides, you're welcome to drop in anytime." She turned around, and he slipped his arms around her waist.

>"Good night, my dear," he said.

>"Good night," she whispered. She closed her eyes, but didn't let herself venture into the Dreamscape. They laid in silence, each thinking the other was asleep. Finally, Ares shifted his position. Xena said nothing, and kept her eyes closed, assuming he was only getting more comfortable. But as he was moving, she felt something wet hit her arm. Something small. And then a shaky intake of breath. Not wanting to hurt his pride, she said nothing. When he was situated, however, she moved closer to him, offering without words what comfort she could. Pained and disheartened, she finally found peace as she let Morpheus take her.

>)((((((((())))))(

>When she awoke, she felt Ares' warm, comforting breath on her neck and his strong, inviting arms around her waist. She turned to look at him. Instead of seeing the malicious, evil god she'd known for so long, she saw the one she used to know. The one she thought was gone...the one she conned herself into believing never existed.

>She grinned. They weren't enemies anymore. He had finally confessed he loved her.

>She leaned over and brushed his lips with her own. She kissed him, a kiss full of passion. She closed her eyes, relishing in the feel of his warm lips against hers.

>She soon felt his arms wrap around her, and she entwined her arms behind his neck.

>They parted, and she opened her eyes, finding Ares' dark brown ones gazing at her. She felt tears coming to her own. How was she supposed to leave him?

>She leaned over and kissed him again.

>The tears were coming now, wetting her face as well as his.

>When they parted again, Ares pulled her up so that she was lying on his chest, and then held her tightly.

>"Hey, it's okay," he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

>A couple minutes later, her crying silenced.

>"How am I supposed to live without you?" she asked softly.

>"Xena, we'll be together again," Ares said.

>They sat in silence for awhile.

>Ares finally broke it. "When do you want to leave?"

>Xena crossed her arms and laid her head down on them, as Ares had done before at the waterfall.

>"In a couple of hours," she said.

>"What shall we do until then?" he asked.

>She leaned her head towards him, and kissed him once more.

>When they parted, Ares whispered with a grin, "It's about time."

>Xena rolled her eyes. "That meant kiss me, nothing more," she said, and rolled off.

>"Now, Xena, you know you want to," he said, lips forming a pout.

>Xena shook her head. Gods, he could be so cute!

>"I don't think so," she said. "I'm going to say good-bye to everyone, and then I'll meet you back here."

>"Fine," he said, nodding.

>"Bye," she said, and walked out the door.

>Ares sighed and laid back, closing his eyes.

>)(((((((((

>Xena slipped back through the bedchamber door to find Ares in the hot tub, leaning back, eyes closed.

>"Did you get bored without me?" she asked as she walked over to the tub.

>His eyes opened. "Yeah. Where have you been?"

>"I had to say good-bye to all of my friends," Xena said.

>"Mmm," he said. He frowned slightly, knowing she should leave soon, but not wanting to say anything. He sighed and said, "When did you want to leave?"

>She looked at him unhappily. "I suppose I'll go soon."

>Seeing her downcast expression, he transported himself over to her, once again clad in his famous black leather. He lifted her chin, bringing her lips to his, and kissed her.

>"It won't be long before we're together again, my love," he said. He flashed her an encouraging smile, as encouraging as he could manage.

>She smiled a hopeful, trusting smile in return.

>"Do you want to go back now?" Ares asked gently.

>She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. She nodded slowly.

>Ares pulled her into his arms, holding her protectively.

>"Sweet, I have something for you," Ares said, willing himself to release her.

>She studied him questioningly.

>He grinned, and her chakram appeared in his hands.

>Her eyes lit up as he handed it to her, looking as new as the day he had given it to her the first time.

>"Thanks," she murmured. She put it in its place on her armor, and then slid her arms around his neck, bringing him closer for a kiss.

>When they parted, he looked into her eyes. "I love you."

>"Always?"

>"Forever."

>"You're not going to forget about me if another pretty woman comes along?" she asked, only half jokingly.

>"Never, Princess," he said, kissing her cheek. "After being with you, what could one possibly see in another woman?"

>She hugged him tightly. "I'm ready to go."

>"Okay. I'll have you and Argo appear in Potediai," he said.

>"Okay," Xena said. "Good-bye, Ares. And I love you, too, by the way."

>He pressed his warm lips to her forehead in one last kiss, and then waved his hand.

>Xena disappeared.

>~*~

>THE END...

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see In the Hands of War : Book II
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